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Allegory as Interpretation

Morton W. Bloomfield

I

ONE OF THE basic functions of allegory is to make literary documents relevant. Historically, the allegorical method as the West knows it was developed in Alexandria to interpret "properly" Homer, and somewhat later there and in Palestine to interpret "properly" the Old Testament, so that it could be seen as the foreshadowing and prediction of Christ or the future kingdom of God. Allegory in this sense is the seeing of the significance of a literary work beyond its meaning. The only stable element in a literary work is its words, which, if we know the language in which it is written, have a meaning. The significance of that meaning is what may be called allegory. The problem of interpretation is the problem of allegory—whether historical or ahistorical. Historical allegorical interpretation attempts to read the significance of a literary work in terms of its original or assumed original significance. This sophisticated approach is essentially modern and was first developed in the Renaissance and flowered in the last two centuries. Historical interpretation may also be used for the purpose of modern interpretations. One can argue that the work must be established in its own mode first, before we can interpret it properly for our own time. Ahistorical interpretation, on the other hand, is interested in the "universal" (i.e., contemporary) significance of a work which may be psychological, ethical, structural, mythic, religious, or several of these. It is the oldest type of allegorical interpretation.

In this view of the matter, allegory is that which is established by interpretation, or the interpretative process itself.¹ Allegory, in this

1 I'm rather close to Northrop Frye in some ways. He writes, for instance, "It is not often realized that all commentary is allegorical interpretation, an attaching of ideas to the structure of poetic imagery." *Anatomy of Criticism: Four Essays* (Princeton, 1957), p. 89. L. C. Knights prefers to use the term "metaphoric process" for allegory as interpretation. (See "King Lear as Metaphor," reprinted in *Further Explorations* [Palo Alto, 1965], p. 169.) I think this is confusing, for the allegorical process is only metaphoric by a vague analogy.

sense, is the method of modernization, that which has made, makes or keeps modern those literary documents of the past which can bear such a load of continual reinterpretation.

Allegory is, in this sense, that which conquers time, that which perpetually renews the written word. The age that does not need, or thinks it does not need, the past does not need this kind of allegory. Allegory insists on a continuing and relevant meaning. When the past is not listened to, allegory declines. It is closely connected with texts. The humanistic method is exegetical and allegorical in so far as it depends on texts. In this, it fundamentally differs from science, which only exegeticizes metaphorically: reads the book of nature.

The allegorical or historical interpretative mind is continually telling us that the past is relevant and the quotations of the past apply today. It is text-oriented. Jesus again and again says, "as it is written"—and breaks our lonely isolation by linking us through quotations with past Law taking texts and applying them to the present case—casuistry in the best sense of the word. These insist on the perpetual relevance—at least in theory—of the past.

Paul de Man has written, "All representational poetry is always also allegorical, whether it be aware of it or not, and the allegorical power of the language undermines and obscures the specific literal meaning of a representation open to understanding. But allegorical poetry must contain a representational element that invites and allows for understanding, only to discover that the understanding it reaches is necessarily in error."² The poetics of representational and allegorical literature are close to each other.

In this view of allegory, which does not set it against a representational or mimetic reading, and which sees it as the mode of understanding the significance of texts, most scholars and literary critics are allegorists. If we interpret a work of art, we are seeking its significance—either historically or ahistorically. Except for textual scholars who attempt to preserve and correct the verbal surface of a work (and who may occasionally use significance "allegory" to do it), we may put all interpreters of literature into the general category of allegorists—many of whom are modernizers. True literary scholarship aims at making literature of the past continuously relevant either by establishing its original significance or its modern significance.³

2 See "Lyric and Modernity," *Forms of Lyric, Selected Papers from the English Institute*, ed. Reuben A. Brower (New York and London, 1970), p. 175.

3 Occasionally its intermediate significance, as when, for instance, one writes on Shakespeare in the eighteenth century. Such scholarship, however, seeks to make the eighteenth century, if not Shakespeare, relevant. It is possible that some

The notion of interpretation has been under attack in recent years. Some contemporary French structuralists have denied that there is anything to interpret, and refuse to distinguish in any fundamental way literature and literary criticism.⁴ Susan Sontag has written a collection of essays significantly titled *Against Interpretation*; and Frederic Jameson speaks quite bluntly in saying, "Exegesis, interpretation, commentary have fallen into disrepute."⁵ In spite of this understandable weariness with the mass of exegesis available and continually piling up, and with history which continually demands exegesis, I do not think that we need take this attitude too seriously if intellectual endeavor and society are to continue at all. A society cannot exist without criticism and its use of allegorization. I think that, given the persistence of our society, interpretation need not fear for its existence, because 1) the very critics of interpretation themselves interpret, and 2) many of the critics of interpretation are actually not reacting against interpretation but against a particular interpretation, and 3) intelligence forces interpretation on us. Furthermore, the social sciences are beginning to realize that the paradigm of social interpretation is to be found in literary and linguistic interpretation. This last point argues that cultural manifestations must be read as texts are read. Everything that happens in society has its own grammar which can explain it. Literary, philosophical, journalistic, ritualistic and conventional forms, play and work all have their own language which can be read by the interpreter. Interpretation will disappear only when thinking disappears, for it can exist even without writing. One can always think—thoughts are beyond the reach of anyone.

Turning to the term *allegory*, we may see that it has been used, as we have implied, to cover many different meanings. Furthermore, when the subject is discussed, words like *symbol*, *icon*, *myth*, *emblem*, *image*,

kinds of structural analysis are not hermeneutic as such, but subsidiary or complementary to it. See Gerard Genette, "Structuralisme et critique littéraire," *L'arc*, 26 (1965), 40-41. It is hard, however, to imagine how any structural divisioning can be made without some interpretation of the text.

4 Discussed by Eugenio Donato in "The Two Languages of Criticism," in *The Languages of Criticism and the Sciences of Man, the Structuralist Controversy*, ed. Richard Macksey and Eugenio Donato (Baltimore and London, 1970) pp. 89 ff., especially p. 96.

5 "Metacommentary," *PMLA*, 86 (1971), 9. Yet others are more concerned with it than ever. One example of this interest is this present issue of *NLH*. In 1959 Hans Lipps tried to lay down some principles for a hermeneutic logic. See his *Untersuchungen zu einer hermeneutischen Logik*, Philosophische Abhandlungen, No. 7 (Frankfurt am Main, 1959).

sign recur again and again. To separate these senses is almost a super-human task. One example sums up the whole problem. Theology has been concerned for the past thirty years with the notion of demythologization, ever since Rudolph Bultmann raised the issue. He said that in order to get to the core of the Christian message, the mythological elements in the New Testament must be eliminated. We no longer live in a world of demons, of astrological powers, of magic, of miracles. These elements are stumbling blocks for moderns. In order that modern man understand the permanent meaning of Jesus' life and death, we must get to the heart of the Christian message and eliminate the historical paraphernalia.

Now to the demythologizers, *myth* means the fake beliefs, the historical contingents, of any epoch. Myth is a bad word. In some modern literary criticism, however, we find just the opposite use of terms: we are urged to find the myth in literature. The myth, especially the archetypal myth, is the core of literature, its permanent underlying meaning. It is the eternal truth of literary works, the meaning to us and to all men in every time and clime, extracted from the historical accidents in which it is embedded. Supporters of this view are saying the same as Bultmann and his followers, but they are using the exact opposite word to describe it. Instead of "demythologizing" literature they are "mythologizing" it. But whether "demythologizing" or "mythologizing," both the theologians and these literary critics are at one. Yet the word *myth* is bad to the theologians and good to the critics.⁶

Some critics like C. S. Lewis have attempted to separate the terms allegory and symbolism, reserving the former for what we would call personification-allegory. However, few keep to this distinction, although some critics, following Coleridge, use allegory as a bad term and symbolism as a good one. Symbolism is imaginative and allegory is fanciful to these critics. I shall not attempt to keep these terms

6 Jean Daniélou, "La démythisation dans l'École d'Alexandrie," *Il problema della demitizzazione, Archivio di Filosofia*, 1961, Nos. 1 and 2 (Padua, 1961), pp. 45-49, argues as we have that Alexandrine allegory is supposed to have been demythologizing, i.e., modernizing the Bible à la Bultmann. For the centrality of the problem of myth and the closely related problem of interpretation in much contemporary theology, especially Protestant, see Pierre Barthel, *Interprétation du Langage mythique et théologie biblique, Etude de quelques étages de l'évolution du problème de l'interprétation . . .* (Leiden, 1963). Yet note *Herméneutique et tradition, Actes du colloque international Rome, 10-16 janvier 1963*, (Paris and Rome, 1963). Enrico Castelli in "Herméneutique et tradition," *ibid.*, pp. xi-xvi, writes, "La démythisation est toujours le résultat d'une herméneutique" (p. xi).

separate here. Some distinctions, however, should be made.

We must distinguish between individual symbols, images or emblems referred to or described in a work of art, and symbolism as a mode of writing which is in principle detachable from the literary text and which consciously aims at a universal relevance. It is clear that individuals and objects can be used as symbols in literature. Diogenes and the cross provide examples. The raven croaking, "Nevermore," the letter in *The Scarlet Letter*, the Grecian urn are other examples. These have a wide extension in literature and serve a variety of purposes. They function differently in different texts, but they are intimately bound up with the text. It is not always possible to distinguish them from imagery.

Symbolic or allegorical works of art, however, usually mean something more than texts which contain symbols or emblems. They possess a level of significance in the work deliberately emphasized and manipulated by the writer and in principle detachable from the text.

Another complicating factor is a long tradition of secret teaching that goes back to Pythagoras and Plato and possibly beyond, which we may call the hermetic tradition. It is probably true that some great spirits taught in their writings an esoteric doctrine to which only the wise could penetrate. Leo Strauss has stressed in the past thirty-five years the importance of this aspect of philosophy and theology. Certain subjects or aspects of subjects are not for the profane, for the general, or for the masses. The words written down are for the wise and able. Some philosophers have or hint at a secret doctrine above the plain meaning of the text. Maimonides, in the introduction to his *Guide to the Perplexed*, speaks of the allegorical parables and figures under which he is writing.⁷ Even more frequently, prophets and disciples have claimed to find a secret meaning in the writings of others. The Baconians have tried to find the secret messages of Bacon in cryptograms in Shakespeare's works. Such interpretations of the Bible are legion.

Then there are works which openly present difficulties on the surface—Gnostic, Kabbalistic and Hermetic (with a capital H)—writings which are meant to be read only for their secret senses. Allegory in the hermetic sense, then, is deliberately secret and concerns itself with mystical or semi-mystical doctrines. Moreover, sometimes individual symbols as discussed above may have hermetic meanings. Athanasius

7 Trans. M. Friedländer, 2nd. ed. (London, 1904), pp. 4 ff.

Kircher in his *Obeliscus Ægyptiacus*, (1650) writes that a symbol is "the significant sign of a hidden mystery."⁸

Some of these hermetic works speak openly about their secrets or even give a key to the reader so that he may see through what to the writer are obvious symbols. Some readers are hermetically-minded in any case, to which the numerous *romans à clef* interpretations of literary works bear evidence. Some are convinced, as Sir Philip Sidney was, that "there are many mysteries contained in Poetry, which of purpose were written darkly, lest by profane wits it should be abused." Some literature may have an inner political meaning—"æsoptic"—as the Russians call it.

Hermetic allegory differs from Biblical, Classical, and other allegories largely in the attitude it creates in its adepts and readers—one of awe at a hidden secret meaning which presumably is not open to the profane and vulgar. It also differs in its vagueness from normal Biblical and Classical allegory. Even when the latter is contradictory, as sometimes happens, we at least know what the alternatives are. With hermetic allegory, one can never be sure.

Hermetic allegory is often taken as the only kind of allegory. Michael Murrin in his recent book, *The Veil of Allegory*,⁹ writes that "allegory is preeminently an obscure form of poetry" (p. 8) and that "the allegorical poet . . . expends much of his energy in protecting his truth from the multitude, rather than communicating it" (p. 9). This view of allegory was especially widespread in the Renaissance and is based on a sense of an ancient, restricted body of knowledge accessible only to an élite, and at the same time on a desire to defend poetry as a worthy peer of philosophy. Poetry is a more hidden kind of philosophy, of higher worth and not for the profane. Allegory in this sense desires to restore, as Paul Ricoeur puts it, some lost, forgotten meaning, a process which he calls negative hermeneutic.¹⁰

Another use of allegory, as we have suggested, is applied to a special kind of writing which employs personifications. Some medieval allegories are of this type, in which abstractions such as Truth, Holy

8 Quoted in Don Cameron Allen, *Mysteriously Meant, The Rediscovery of Pagan Symbolism and Allegorical Interpretation in the Renaissance* (Baltimore and London, 1970), p. 128. This whole book is a valuable collection of Renaissance material on the hermetic tradition and its allegories (as well as allegorical interpretations of mythology). See also Edgar Wind, *Pagan Mysteries in the Renaissance* (New Haven, 1958, rev. ed. 1968) and Liselotte Dieckmann, *Hieroglyphics, The History of a Literary Symbol* (St. Louis, 1970).

9 (Chicago and London, 1969).

10 *De l'interprétation* (Paris, 1965).

Church, Mr. Everyman, Falssemblant appear as characters and act out their roles. The use of personifications in parts of works of literature and sometimes throughout them is widespread. Personification is perhaps the most common, as it is certainly the most open, of all literary figures.¹¹

As a figure in Classical rhetoric, allegory means "saying one thing and meaning another." Allegory is a general word in this context for a common type of irony.

Some scholars, moreover, have tried to distinguish between horizontal and vertical allegory.¹² Horizontal allegory is sometimes called prophetic allegory, but more commonly figural allegory. Figural allegory, or typology, is common in the Bible when one event or person foreshadows or is the figure or type for another. Auerbach is especially associated with this type of allegory, for he believed that it respected the letter or surface as well as the future meaning. He did not wish, as many allegorical critics do, to despise the surface for the inner meaning or significance.¹³ Auerbach disliked those critics who ignored the literal level as the husk or shell, but at the same time he wished to recognize medieval allegorical techniques. He felt that the "figural" method took seriously both matter and sense. Although Biblical figural allegory was certainly used in the Middle Ages, I doubt whether there was a figural method or composition,¹⁴ except perhaps for the *Divine Comedy*, as Auerbach argues.

When allegory then works on history to project a meaning into the

11 See M. W. Bloomfield, "A Grammatical Approach to Personification Allegory," *MP*, 60 (1962-3), 161-71 (reprinted in *Essays and Explorations, Studies in Ideas, Language and Literature* [Cambridge, Mass., 1970], pp. 243-60) and works referred to there. See also Paolo Valesio, "Esquisse pour une étude des personifications," *Lingua e stile*, 4 (1969), 1-21, and Angus Fletcher, *Allegory, the Theory of a Symbolic Mode* (Ithaca, 1964), pp. 26 ff.

12 E. g., Jean Pépin, *Mythe et allegorie, les origines grecques et les contestations judéo-chrétiennes* (Paris, 1958).

13 His famous article "Figura" appeared first in his *Neue Dante-studien* (Istanbul, 1944), pp. 11-71, and was translated into English by Ralph Manheim. It is most easily available in this form in Erich Auerbach, *Scenes from the Drama of European Literature, Six Essays* (New York, 1959), pp. 11-76.

14 "Foreshadowing" is a well-attested method of composition found in Homer and common in all periods. I do not consider normal foreshadowing figural composition. It did not need the Biblical example for its existence as a method of composition. Unless one is committed to a new prophetic theory (as, say, Joachim of Flora), it is hard to conceive of what figural composition means. I follow Anthony Nemetz when he writes, ". . . what is signified does not determine the mode of signification." (*Speculum*, 34 [1959], 78). A recent attempt to claim such a technique is made by Robert B. Burlin in his helpful *The Old English Advent, A Typological Commentary* (New Haven and London, 1968). I do not question, of course, figural allegories in the OE *Advent*. I am questioning figural composition.

future, we may call it prophetic or horizontal allegory; when it finds an immediate meaning in events, real or literary, it is simple or vertical allegory. The first (when first enumerated, at least) is only fully understandable in retrospection; the second may—but not necessarily—be understood immediately. According to the traditional picture, we owe the first type of allegory to the ancient Hebrews, and the second to the Greeks. In the Christian interpretation of history, particularly Old Testament history, going back to the New Testament itself we find typological or figural allegory (a type of prophetic allegory), in which events have an eschatological or future meaning. Sacred History is a progressive fulfillment of what is latent or obscurely indicated earlier. But vertical allegory is also found in Old Testament exegesis, especially in the Alexandrian school, of which Origen is the notable commentator.¹⁵ This latent sense, besides being called typology, has in modern Catholic theology often been called the “fuller sense” (or *sensus plenior*).¹⁶

However, both Harry Wolfson and others have cast doubt on this picture. Wolfson doubts whether there is any fundamental difference between typology and allegory in Philo and the Church Fathers.¹⁷ After all, one of the levels of vertical allegory is called (confusingly enough) the allegorical level. This is supposed to indicate events in the life of the Church and its divine founder. Such interpretations would certainly be very typological.

De Lubac in his great study of medieval exegesis¹⁸ attacks the notion that Catholic thinkers ever tended to ignore the literal sense, and argues that many-leveled allegory pays as much attention to the historic and literal sense as typology. We need not enter into this dispute here, but these critics have a point. Some Church Fathers, however, did tend, in practice at least, to ignore the literal for the spiritual meaning.

II

When we, however, define allegory in its broadest sense as significance, we must make room for a number of distinctions within this general

¹⁵ This is the picture presented in, say, R. W. C. Hanson, *Allegory and Event* (London, 1959). Hanson, like Auerbach, approves of typology but frowns on allegory.

¹⁶ See Pierre Benoit, “La plénitude de sens des livres saints,” *RB*, 67 (1960), 161-96.

¹⁷ See, e.g. Harry Austryn Wolfson, *Faith, Trinity, Incarnation, The Philosophy of the Church Fathers*, 3rd ed. rev. (Cambridge, 1970), I, 24 ff. especially 39 ff.

¹⁸ *Exégèse médiévale, Les quatre sens de l'Écriture*, Théologie, 41, 42, 59 (1959-63).

category if the concept is to be usable at all. We have already referred to systems of significations, such as Christianity, which were commonly used in a period like the Middle Ages and Renaissance as the matrix of allegory. This is the basis of historical allegory in the West. Furthermore, we must recognize the special uses of allegory or symbolism as indicated above in symbols and emblems. There is also personification-allegory, allegory as irony, and hermetic allegory.

Even more important is to distinguish between conscious and unconscious allegories. This problem pertains especially to ahistorical allegory in the modern period. If a work of art is to have any meaning, it must in some sense be symbolic. *David Copperfield* is, in this general sense, as symbolic as *Moby Dick*. If a work of art says anything, it must have a general meaning in or above the meaning of its particulars. Particulars by themselves present only raw experience. To be understood, they must be conceived of as particulars of *something*. They must, unless they are proper nouns, belong to a class of particulars. In this sense, experience—present and past and potential, in fact or in words—has in its ordinary way a meaning and a meaning of organization above and beyond the meaning of its particulars, which I have called, above, signification. This is what Aristotle meant by his famous distinction between poetry and secular history. (Sacred History is, however, significant history.)

Particulars, then, must be significant particulars. Yet I think we all recognize a difference between Kafka and Golding on the one hand, and C. P. Snow and Joyce Cary on the other. Of the first two we say that they are symbolists (or allegorists), although usually no two critics can agree as to what is being symbolized in their novels, whereas we do not apply that term to the second one. How can we make precise this distinction? It does not lie merely in the first group of novels all having a significance above and beyond the surface, for both groups of novels share this characteristic, but it must lie in the way in which this significance is hinted at or presented.

Here I think the notion of dominance put forward by Angus Fletcher as a development from Northrop Frye's idea is helpful. Fletcher writes, "Whenever a literary work is dominated by its theme, it is likely to be called an allegory. . . . Allegorical stories exist, as it were, to put secondary meanings into orbit around them; the primary meaning is then valued for its satellites."¹⁹ In allegorical writing, Frye says, the author's whole technique "tries to indicate how a commentary

19 Fletcher, pp. 220-21, 304-05. See N. Frye, *Anatomy*, pp. 89-90.

on him should proceed." This, he goes on to say, imitates critics, because it attempts to prescribe how to interpret a poem.²⁰

In allegorical novels, then, the "significance" exercises a close control over the plot, imagery, tone, and characters. Every element is theoretically there for its significance. The surface tends to exist for the sake of the signification or significations. The theme controls in a relatively close way the story. As we read, we sense this control.

Novels which are not primarily allegorical, or are only allegorical in the most general sense of the word, tend to give a freer rein to the story and the details. All elements do not seem to be under the tight control of the significance. Many of them establish a situation or provide a background which is not strictly needed. They are not "over-determined."

This distinction, however, must not be taken in too strict a sense, but in general it is helpful to define the essence of the difference between allegory in one of its narrower senses and allegory as significance. Nor must we conclude from this distinction that the significance of an allegory is necessarily easy to determine. It may or may not be so. Just because a narrative gives the impression of being closely controlled by the theme does not mean that the theme is necessarily unisemous or easy to unravel.

Furthermore, in a curious way, the non-allegorical work allows for less detachability than the allegorical work. The symbolism of *David Copperfield* is in the surface of the work in a deeper way than in *The Castle*. K. could be replaced by someone else in *The Castle*. Without David Copperfield and all the other characters and events there could be no *David Copperfield* (even with a different title). This is not to say, of course, that the name K. rather than Hans Neumann, for instance, does not bring anything in particular to the novel. In fact, the relation of K. to the author's own name is a particularly brilliant piece of allegorizing. However, the greater part of the significance of *The Castle*, whatever it may be, could still be there if the hero were named Hans Neumann and underwent many different experiences. An allegory can always be added to.

By making use of the notion of detachability along with that of dominance, we shall be helped to make the kind of distinctions necessary if we wish to define allegory as interpretation of the significance of a work of art. The awareness of this detachability enabled Hazlitt to make his famous *bon mot* about the *Faerie Queene*: "If we don't meddle with the allegory, the allegory won't meddle with us." It is

20 *Ibid.*, pp. 89-90.

easy to detach the allegory of the *Roman de la Rose* from this work. It is not easy to detach the allegory from Chaucer's *Parlement of Foules*. Furthermore, the theme of the *Roman de la Rose* (RR) dominates it in a more involved way than the theme of the *Parlement of Foules* dominates that little work. We may say that RR is an allegory (in the narrower sense of the word) and the *Parlement of Foules* is not.

However, if we are committed to a theory of interpretation that claims, for instance, that all medieval literary works exist to promote the lessons of Christianity or that they contain the four levels of Biblical interpretation which are traditionally found, at least at some periods in the Middle Ages, then we may find a special allegory in all medieval literature.

The Frye-Fletcher definitions must be used with caution, inasmuch as, without common sense and a close reliance on the text, one may lack the criteria of corrigibility. As C. S. Lewis says, "No story can be devised by the wit of man which cannot be interpreted allegorically by the wit of some other man. . . . Therefore the mere fact that you can allegorize the work before you is of itself no proof that it is an allegory."²¹ Now, works can certainly have a plethora of significations, but they cannot have an infinity of significations if we are concerned with the historical situation. If we are not, then any work can mean many things—but the historical truth acts as a sobering force. It is not satisfying to feel that anything can mean anything.

III

The crux of the problem of allegory as interpretation is the surface of the work. The text is the skin which makes possible the existence of the work. Renoir is supposed to have said that he was not a butcher. He did not paint flesh, he went on to say, but skin. What is the surface of the literary work that enables us to interpret it? Here, in the most stable and enduring part of the work of art, we run into difficulty, for I

²¹ "On Criticism" printed in *Of Other Worlds, Essays and Stories*, ed. Walter Hooper (London, 1966), pp. 57-58, (a talk given to the Cambridge University English Club, on 24 November 1955). Cf. the story told by Giraldus Cambrensis (*Opera*, Rolls Series, I, pp. 409-10) about the allegorizing of the author. "The archbishop listened diligently to that part which concerned the birds, their natures, and the allegories assigned to them. . . . He inquired whether I had some evidence from the writings of the Saints and commentators for assigning such allegories. I answered that actually there was no authority there except that which came from divine Grace. The good man replied, 'I do not marvel at that, for surely these are in the same spirit.'"

shall argue that the surface of a literary work is not simple to determine and contains at least two, and possibly more, levels. When we are talking about the literal level, we are already talking about a very complex phenomenon. I hope, in fact, to argue paradoxically that the most profound aspect of a literary work is its surface such as it is; as we explore it, it vanishes too.

The achievement of great literary works obviously lies in their being put together in the way they are. It is the manipulation of words in a certain order which is the accomplishment. Words are sound or written symbols which tend to lose their own being in their referentiability, one might say, except for the small number of grammatical words which exist in order to indicate primarily grammatical relations. The vast numbers of words in any language are referential or lexical—moving out of their sentence or word contexts to refer to ideas, things, movements, etc. The literary artist, in whatever form, will not forget the *symbolic* role of his words. He will appreciate their being-ness. In so far as he “foregrounds” his words, he is an artist. He makes the referential words lose some of their referentiability so that we can appreciate them as words. For this alone, which creates the very basis of the verbal art, we must be grateful for the literal sense. The literal sense makes the work exist as art.

Now this is all very obvious, but it needs stating because those who treat art purely referentially or didactically tend to ignore or minimize the literal sense. With the large number of searchers after archetypes and moral messages today, “the allegorical berserk” as Arthur Freeman puts it,²² to remind the reader of the magic and power of the literal is, I think, valuable. Archetypes and moral messages do exist, of course; but pan-allegorism is another matter.

The literal level, in one sense, is a series of noises and/or marks on paper, as is all language. Because these noises and marks carry distinctive and contrastive features in terms of a system of meaning exhibited in recursive syntactic rules, we can interpret them as meaningful noises or marks—meaningful in the English (or what have you) language system. They cannot be conceived with any sense as a literal level without carrying some meaning. The literal level, in a literal sense, is gibberish. Once the semantic element is introduced, and it must be if these noises are to be more than a foreign language or the chattering of a squirrel, then we have to bring in some meaning immediately. If in spite of this meaning to which native speakers are attuned from early

22 In his poem “Swift, 1740.”

childhood we can still be forced to attend to the noises as noises, then we are appreciating the discourse (or actively disliking it).

If, then, meaning must be on the literal level, as I am arguing, the question then arises as to what this meaning must include before conscious interpretation (allegory in the broad sense of the word) begins. When does the area of signification begin? Anthony Nemetz in an article on the medieval "*sensus litteralis*"²³ argues that medieval philosophy included figures of speech, metaphors, and even parables on the "*sensus litteralis*." (He refuses to translate it as "literal level," because the phrase in modern criticism has normally a much more restricted meaning; he believes this confusion explains much misunderstanding.) Only, he argues, if what the words refer to refers to something else, may we then speak of the spiritual sense. In other words, only if what the words stand for is yet something else, like the events and beliefs of Christianity, may we speak of a spiritual sense. ". . . the *sensus litteralis* is concerned with the signification of words and concepts, . . . the *sensus spiritualis* is concerned with the signification of the things which the words signify" (p. 79).

This point is certainly made by Augustine (e.g., *De Trinitate* XV, 9, 15), by Aquinas (*S.T.* I, 1, 108, and *In Gal.* 4:7), and by others, but I suspect that it is only partially true. I do not doubt the fact that many did regard the matter in this light, nor the fact that the more the literal sense includes, the less allegory (and vice versa); but I do doubt whether the practice of medieval allegorists consistently followed this division between the signification of words and the signification of what the words stand for. For one thing, the four-fold allegorical technique—which is essentially a monastic technique, not a scholastic one—did not move, in general, in this way. The moral or tropological level, for instance, is not a specifically Christian level; it does not refer to another reality revealed by words, but is actually *seen in the meaning itself*. When Isaac displays the virtue of obedience as he willingly lies on the altar at his father's command, the tropological meaning is right in the primary level of meaning: obedience to the commands of one's superiors. Furthermore, in personification-allegory the allegorical meaning (or most of it) is in the literal sense itself. When Lady Holy Church appears in Passus I of the B Text of *Piers Plowman*, her allegorical significance is not the Christian significance of what Holy Church stands for, it is Holy Church right then and there.

In other words, the problem of the literal level is much more complex, I think, than has been generally admitted. It is not easy to draw

23 See above, note 14.

the line between the literal and the spiritual level, let alone three spiritual levels. Robert Hollander in a recent book would find the four-fold "meaning" everywhere in the *Divine Comedy*.²⁴ It is encouraging to learn from him that, owing to the obtuseness of early commentators on the *Divine Comedy*, as well as to other factors, no one until Mr. Hollander came along has been able to understand Dante's method. He confuses (to me, at least) typology with the four-fold method, although—as may be seen above—I am willing to admit that distinctions here are hard to make. But there are obviously some differences, including the fact that typology is very text oriented, in a way the four-fold meaning is not. It is hard to see how a poem like the *Divine Comedy*, which is almost completely concerned with anagogy (eschatology) (the highest spiritual level) on the literal level,²⁵ can contain four-fold meanings above this literal level. Pietro Alighieri, the son of Dante, finds seven senses in the work, the first four of which are literal²⁶—superficial, historical, apologetic, and metaphorical. These four are not very clearly distinguished, but they do point to an awareness of complexity of the literal. Some Biblical commentators in our own time have also referred to the possibility of a double literal sense.²⁷

The problem of the allegorical level, or allegory as interpretation, lies essentially in the literal level. Meaning in many senses is intertwined with the literal level. Furthermore, the over-all signification sometimes is necessary in order to get the "meaning." These levels and their divisions are a very complicated matter. In fact, the basic role of hermeneutics is to distinguish the literal-meaning level from the signification level, in order finally to bring them together again if necessary. We have here something like the movement from whole to part, and part to whole, in the understanding process.²⁸ The problem is especially acute in works which are conscious allegories and which reflect thought and belief systems like Christianity. The literal-meaning level

24 *Allegory in Dante's Commedia* (Princeton, 1969).

25 Admittedly the eschatological drama is not yet played out—the Last Judgment is yet to come—yet the next world is a major part of the anagogical level and of Christian eschatology.

26 See John Paul Bowden, *An Analysis of Pietro Alighieri's Commentary on the "Divine Comedy,"* Diss. Columbia 1949, pp. 100 ff.

27 See, e.g., *Catholic Biblical Quarterly*, 11 (1949), 202-06.

28 Something very like Leo Spitzer's "philological circle," which, as he points out, goes back to Plato's *Phaedo* and was developed by Schleiermacher, Dilthey, Heidegger, and others. See Spitzer's "Linguistics and Literary History," *Linguistics and Literary History, Essays in Stylistics* (Princeton, 1948), especially pp. 33-35 (n. 10).

is primarily linguistic; the signification or allegorical level is primarily non-linguistic; or perhaps we may say that this level is the life function as opposed to the linguistic function.²⁹

In one sense, as Owen Barfield points out,³⁰ there is no literal sense at all, but few will follow him in his definition of literal, which comes to this conclusion: that literal nouns correspond to real and wholly material entities. I do not think we have to worry about this misconception. Furthermore, what we are talking about is the historical sense and sound of words as far as these may be established. From a historical point of view, the literal sense is changeable in different degrees, depending on the words used, whether they are still understandable and whether they have changed significantly or not. What was once metaphorical may become literal and vice versa, but all this verbal movement happens within the literal sense. Metaphors belong to the literal sense if they are clearly presented. They differ from the simple literal sense in the fact that they paraphrase only asymmetrically. That is—to take the example given by Donald Stewart³¹—we can say that “Richard is a lion” means “Richard is brave,” but not vice versa. A metaphor’s meaning is very open, and it is determined largely by context. We hesitate to say that “Richard is brave” means “Richard is a lion,” because the metaphor can mean other things out of context. Yet both sentences are on the literal level.

Etymologies of words, when we know them, show that words may shift their meanings. However, we are here talking about the synchronic, not the diachronic, literal sense. “Literal” has several meanings, one of which is pejorative. In the sense of “unimaginative,” “literal” may be condemned by all. In our sense, however, all verbal communication has a literal sense, because “literal” refers to that which bears the meaning and the basic meaning borne. Otherwise we are only talking about barks or marks on paper.

There is also a strong tendency to confuse realism with literalism. This widespread error, it seems to me, leads to a tendency to see allegory everywhere. Robert Kaske, who is one of our best medieval scholars, fell into this error when, for instance, talking of the half-acre scene in *Piers Plowman* (B VI), he wrote some years ago, “One inevitably questions the possibility of coherent and significant literal meaning in a

29 See Isabel Hungerland, *Poetic Discourse*, University of California Publications in Philosophy, No. 33 (Berkeley, 1958), p. 36, who provided me with the terms.

30 See his “The Meaning of the Word ‘Literal,’” *Metaphor and Symbol*, ed. L. C. Knights and Basil Cottle, Proceeding of the Twelfth Symposium of the Colston Research Society (London, 1960), pp. 48-57, and discussion, pp. 57-63.

31 See his “Metaphor and Paraphrase,” *Philosophy and Rhetoric*, 4 (1970-71), 115 ff.

narrative embracing elements like the cultivation of a 'half-acre' by so unlikely and so patently composite a group, and Piers' literally meaningless [sic] act of calling to Hunger and Piers' allegorically-named wife and children—a difficulty hardly removed by the explanation. . . ."³² Professor Kaske seems to demand realism, otherwise we can have no literal level. How can we have a work of verbal art at all without a literal level? If this scene has no literal level, how can it exist? It is obvious that behind these remarks is implied a very different concept of a literal level than I have. If we do not have a literal level in the half-acre scene, where is it? In the marks on the paper? In the noises we make when we pronounce them?³³

The literal meaning, both in medieval philosophy and in common sense, includes much more than what many take it to include. Sometimes non-naturalistic elements occur on the literal level, some of which may be self-explanatory. The poet may explain what his allegory means. Or personification may be used to avoid ambiguity. In allegory in the sense we have been discussing it here, there is always the possibility (even though, on occasion, slight) of misunderstanding what is really meant.³⁴ If allegory becomes the literal level, then this normally becomes impossible.

This tendency to see allegory and realism as opposites is the source of much difficulty in interpreting both these multi-faceted terms. In terms of allegory as interpretation, such an opposition is unthinkable, because any work of art must have, at least theoretically, an interpretation. If we think of allegory as the use of symbols, as irony, as a particular system of interpretation—Biblical or hermetic, for example—or as personification narratives, these are all unrealistic, but they all have literal levels of great significance. We cannot ignore the literal sense by saying that the "allegory says" when it is the literal sense that "says."

³² Review of Robert Worth Frank, Jr., *Piers Plowman* . . . (New Haven, 1957), in *MLN*, 84 (1959), 730-31.

³³ A similar type of assumption which confuses the allegorical (in its sense of interpretation or significance) with the literal is made by Mrs. Elizabeth Salter in her *Piers Plowman: An Introduction* (Oxford and Cambridge, Mass., 1962). In discussing *Piers Plowman* B XVI, pp. 51-52, for instance, where the poet tells us how Grace and Holy Ghost resist the world, the flesh, and the devil, Mrs. Salter comments, "The allegory [sic] here is telling the dreamer how individual man struggles against evil with the help of divine examples and agencies." The allegory is telling us nothing; the literal level is telling us this. Further examples of the stripping of the literal level, in which the literal level practically disappears, occur throughout Mrs. Salter's book, and it is especially blatant in a phrase like "the literal allegorical pattern" (p. 75), in which the literal level is called the allegorical because personifications are used.

³⁴ See my review of Mrs. Salter's book (see note 33) in *MP*, 72 (1964-5), 62-64.

Moreover, the literal is not necessarily concrete, nor the allegory abstract. The abstract/concrete dichotomy moves in another universe of discourse. To equate the two is to make a serious categorization mistake.

I should say that the greatness of any work of art lies in the literal sense: that which gives it shape and being.³⁵ It is the literal sense which is by far the most profound, because it always provides us with a new possibility of interpretation. Any particular signification is unchanging. In order to extend signification we must go back to the literal sense. The literal gives life and continuity to the text. It acts as the corrective force to misinterpretation. It says that circumstances are important. What gives the *Divine Comedy* its greatness is the narrative that it presents and the poignancy of the reaction of a man granted the divine grace to make or imagine such a journey and be allowed to record it through his memory, which gives all things significance.

Bernard Lamy in the eighteenth century wrote, "Allegories indeed are always most easy. But it requires a great deal of study and labor to master the literal sense of the sacred books."³⁶ If we take this attitude then it would be impossible to write the following, which denies respect to the literal level and indeed destroys the whole notion of literary art by minimizing the importance of how anything is said. "Even though the surface or literal level of medieval works of literature is by and large designed to take the audience to a symbolic level *that is the real reason for the work's existence*. . . ."³⁷ A work of art is not only what it says, but also what it is.

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35 "To understand and to preserve a literary work is to be primarily concerned with its 'letter,'" and "While the modesty of literary studies lies in their concern with the material and perishable signs on the page, their difficulty lies in preserving the meaning of the literal statement beyond the passing of what it signifies . . ." [from Wesley Trimpi, "The Definition and Practice of Literary Studies," *NLH*, 2 (1970-71), 190, 191-92].

36 In the English translation of his *Apparatus Biblicus*, 1st. ed. (London, 1723), p. 363 (Book II, Chapter XI, Rule VIII).

37 Edmund Reiss, "Symbolic Detail in Medieval Narrative: *Floris and Blanche-flour*," *PLL*, 7 (1971), 339.